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Theorizing Interviews within Qualitative Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the issue of the theoretical underpinning required for research using interviews within qualitative research in applied linguistics. A means to achieving this will be to map out the landscape of qualitative research with specific attention to interviews. This will be mediated by two comparisons. Firstly, an obvious, but nevertheless, necessary comparison between qualitative and quantitative research will establish a working definition of qualitative research. Secondly, a comparison between the different research paradigms within qualitative research will introduce an explicit need for reflectively theorizing the form of enquiry.

Introduction

Interviewing is a research tool that is used to gain insight to, amongst others, biographical details, attitudes, perceptions and interviewing is also used as a means of fixing policy. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) note that qualitative researchers “often put special faith in the interview as the prime means of data collection”. There can be little doubt that the use of interviews has been increasing in applied linguistics research since the beginning of this century. In an analysis of 15 major journals within the field of applied linguistics, the number of qualitative research papers has been steadily increasing since 2000 (Richards 2009). Yet “[d]espite this increase, the qualitative interview has, for the most part, been undertheorized” (Mann 2011) within applied linguistics.

In contrast, other social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology, and

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psychology, have seen a tremendous amount of energy focused on the theory behind interviews and how such theory shapes the research and findings of interview-based research. These disciplines have become conscious of the danger of simply assuming that what an interviewee says is a fact that can be reported with out further consideration. In anthropology, Briggs (2007) warned against “[t]he idea that discourse springs from interviewees’ heads or face-to-face interactions and then moves in unilinear fashion to the pages of professional publications draws our attention away from the intersection of multiple knowledge-making practices and their competing representation”. In sociology, Atkinson and Silverman (1997) noted that, when dealing with interviews, “we see a stubbornly persistent Romantic impulse in contemporary sociology: the elevation of the experiential as authentic”. In psychology, Potter and Wetherell (1987: 159) also noted the need for theorizing research approaches,

Psychologists have been particularly prone to the trap of comparing their discipline to the mythical versions of the natural sciences. They have tended to see the natural sciences as data driven, guided by experiment and almost exclusively concerned with the production of general laws. It is probably as a consequence of such misperception that the theoretician and non-experimental are still regarded with suspicion in psychology. There is a dearth of full-time theorists.

Recently, however, work on theorizing interviews has taken place within applied linguistics (Mann 2011, Talmy 2010, Talmy, 2011, Richards 2011) that is asking similar questions to those already asked in the other social sciences.

Comparison 1: Quantitative and qualitative.

Comparing quantitative and qualitative research can so easily fall in to the trap of creating misleading simplifications that do little justice to either research method. However there are certain criteria within quantitative research that are such central considerations that they can serve as defining concepts for the purpose of a comparison with qualitative research. These criteria are internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. It will be assumed that any reader not familiar with these criteria will be capable of gaining access to a book; hence there will be no need for definitions of these criteria within this paper. Guba and Lincoln (1985) compare the four criteria above with four criteria that they feel are better suited to qualitative research (outlined in Figure 1).

Credibility looks at ensuring the social reality represented in the research is that which was examined. This is brought about by, firstly, adhering to good practice in

Figure 1 Qualitative/quantitative criteria comparison

	Qualitative Criteria	Corresponding Quantitative Criteria
1.	Credibility	Internal Validity
2.	Transferability	External validity
3.	Dependability	Reliability
4.	Confirmability	Objectivity

the research, analysis and writing up of the research, and secondly, by checking with the respondents whether or not they feel the findings are a fair representation of the social reality under scrutiny (sometimes called respondent validation). Of course, good research practice is always commendable, however, respondent validation, may not always be possible, desirable, or even credible. It is worth reflecting on the consequences of attempting respondent validation in order to consider what the research can actually gain from such practice. The second of the four criteria was transferability. Whereas quantitative research can seek to make findings with universal applicability, transferability seeks to make a thick description of the context within which the research was carried out. This is in order to allow any reader to evaluate the relevance of the research to their own situation. This concept is born of a belief that each context is unique and that replicability within qualitative research may not be a realistic proposal. Dependability may be summarized as a peer review of the methodology that takes place before submission for publication. The purpose is to allow the peers to evaluate whether or not the research has drawn its conclusions based on the data collected and not an external ideology. Finally, “confirmability is concerned with ensuring that, while recognizing that complete objectivity is impossible in social research, the researcher can be shown to have acted in good faith; in other words it should be apparent that he or she has not overtly allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations to sway the conduct of the research and the findings deriving from it” (Bryman 2012: 393–394).

Whilst all the above criteria will vary from project to project in their relevance to qualitative research in applied linguistics, it is worth looking at how they can influence the theory behind research. Credibility accepts that social reality is socially constructed and therefore immediately precludes the use of a positivist paradigm (see below). This is an implicit acceptance of the concept of a social reality created through social interaction; in effect it suggests a constructive paradigm. The ontological paradigm of the researcher will eventually narrow down the choices of research method. Transferability accepts the contextually driven nature of any findings and, rather than seeking to alter the research method or research analysis to manufacture universally applicable findings, the researcher includes as much methodological information as possible. This criteria, being so contextually focused,

means that the researcher needs to consider the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee as being relevant; the analysis of the interview data cannot delete the interviewer from the transcript (see Potter and Hepburn 2005). The interaction between the interviewer and interviewee are integral to the context and, therefore, the analysis. The final two criteria both require a close attention to the theory of interviews inasmuch as the data must be central and not an ideological belief. This in turn requires the researcher to pay attention to how the data will be produced and analyzed.

In short, theorizing interviews should be done before choosing a qualitative or quantitative path. The researcher will have beliefs on the nature of knowledge and how that knowledge can be known (ontology and epistemology), and these beliefs will narrow the choices of which methodology to use. This involves a comparison of the research paradigms that are available to the researcher.

Comparison 2: Research paradigms

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) describe a paradigm as encompassing four distinct concepts; ethics, ontology, epistemology and methodology. It would seem only natural that a researcher would choose the method of data collection and data analysis after they have theorized on their ontological and epistemological beliefs. Hatch (2002) suggests that failing to address the paradigmatic issues that ultimately lie at the very core of research can leave researchers with a project that can become inconsistent or even illogical.

The paradigms that are available are by no means agreed upon. Roulston (2010) sees there as being six research paradigms, Hatch (2002) identifies five paradigms, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) see there as being five paradigms but with some difference from the five Hatch identifies. Hatch (2002) is by far the clearest description of the research paradigms and these paradigms are in Figure 2 (Hatch, 2002: 13).

From Figure 2, it can be seen that there is a natural progression from ontology to methodology. Each method of data analysis is set beside an epistemological and ontological belief. A researcher who does not engage in attempting to understand their ontological/epistemological perspective may use a method not suited for answering the question they are interested in. Clearly, theorizing about what an interview can reveal will require theorizing about ontological beliefs.

Figure 2 Research Paradigms

	Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology	Products
Positivist	Reality is out there to be studied, captured and understood	How the world is really ordered ; Knower is distinct from known	Experiments, quasi-experiments, surveys, correlational studies	Facts, theories, laws, predictions
Postpositivist	Reality exists but is never fully apprehended, only approximated	Approximations of reality; Researcher is data collection instrument	Rigorously defined qualitative methods, frequency counts, low-level statistics.	Generalizations, descriptions, patterns, grounded theory
Constructivist	Multiple realities are constructed	Knowledge as a human construction;	Naturalistic qualitative methods	Case studies, narratives, interpretations, reconstructions
Critical/Feminist	The apprehended world makes a material difference in terms of race, gender, and class	Knowledge as subjective and political; Researchers' value frame enquiry	Transformative inquiry	Value mediated critiques that challenge existing power structures and promote resistance
Poststructuralist	Order is created within individual minds to ascribe meaning to a meaningless universe	There is no "Truth" to be known; Researchers examine the world through textual representations of it.	Deconstruction; Genealogy; Data-based, multivoiced studies	Deconstructions; Genealogies: Reflexive, polyvocal texts

Conclusion

Atkinson and Silverman (1997) suggest that the ubiquity of the interview in modern society has led to an unquestioning and unreflective acceptance within society at large that what is said in an interview is a representation of reality that can be made immediately available as a resource for analysis. Yet, a reflective approach to the theory of interviews notes the contextually driven nature of the findings and also that an ontological perspective should inform the manner in which the research tool is selected. Approaching interviews in qualitative research within the field of linguistics will benefit from taking time to explore the paradigms that inform the theories, and, in turn, the methodologies.

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